

Weighing the Value of the Web

How Weigh-Tronix Improved Customer Service with WebSmart

What the web is worth to your company can be weighed in dollars. Like any prudent business investment, the acquisition of new technology must pass increasingly rigorous analysis. Obviously, the benefit of the technology must outweigh the cost or it will be dismissed as an unwarranted expense. This can be calculated in hard dollars, using increased sales and decreased operating costs; or in soft dollars by assessing competitive advantage and improved customer service.

On the other side of the scale is risk. Organizations that disregard powerful new technology that they have not yet thoroughly validated, may experience lost opportunities for new business or the departure of existing customers to companies that offer state-of-the-art conveniences. It is evident that the web has carved its niche. However, companies still argue that they have yet to find a problem that this solution can be fully applied to. Weigh-Tronix is one company that has clearly profited from their commitment to progress.



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Duane Danner, Weigh-Tronix, Inc.

A Heavy Weight

Weigh-Tronix has among its clients, U.S. Governmental agencies and top corporations. In thirty years of doing business with organizations large and small, Weigh-Tronix has become the world's second largest manufacturer of precision weighing equipment, counters, and printers. Weigh-Tronix has based their success on three decades of continuous innovation. Prior to 1971, all scales relied on mechanical means such as springs and counterweights to measure weight. Weigh-Tronix produced the world's first all electronic scale under the NCI brand name, and dramatically changed the world of weights and measures. Weigh-Tronix also invented a unique device that has become an industry standard, called the Weigh Bar, a durable sealed weight sensor that is the core component to any truck or platform scale.

Recently, Weigh-Tronix carefully evaluated the benefits of implementing a web-based order tracking system for customers, distributors, and customer service reps at satellite offices. Weigh-Tronix ships hundreds of new and repaired instruments and parts on a daily basis, but the company was spending an inordinate amount of time tracking these shipments. To check on the status of an order, a customer service representative would have to find the order number, determine if it was filled and shipped, find the shipper tracking number, call the shipper, which was either Federal Express or UPS and finally discover when it was picked up and where it was in transit. This process could take up to 45 minutes. Because Weigh-Tronix customer service representatives are also responsible for new sales, it was clear that an improvement in this process would result in increased revenue.

In accordance with a long-standing commitment to excellence, they looked for a way to improve customer service responsiveness and streamline internal processes that support this functional area through the application of technology. In this instance, their project definition called for a secure browser based extranet extension to a production order tracking system that would enable customers to review the status of existing orders including item numbers, part numbers, time shipped and the shipping agent.

Duane Danner, a dedicated veteran RPG, COBOL and Basic developer with 26 years of experience, was chosen to coordinate the project. With specifications in hand, he spoke with several website solution providers and web development tool vendors; gathered data pertaining to features, performance and price and composed a spreadsheet. The site development companies that he spoke with quoted between \$50,000 and \$70,000 to deliver the initial order-tracking package. Any subsequent changes or additions would result in additional fees. Aside from being expensive from a dollars to value perspective, the subsequent order tracking website would not be linked to the Weigh-Tronix production System i database, so any updates regarding order/ship status would have to be periodically batched up and applied, and therefore providing only a partial solution.



WEIGH-TRONIX®
Weighing Products & Systems

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Danner attended a training seminar conducted by a company that sells a System i-based web development tool. Following the seminar, Danner quickly realized that this solution was unsuitable as well. "It was very complicated," noted Danner. "Although I'm not new to programming, I'm also not a web developer. My existing set of skills did not get me very far with this solution and it was evident that we were going to have to contract for services with this company to get the project finished, adding to the already high cost."

Dolly Newville, the Weigh-Tronix Information Systems Manager, reviewed Danner's findings and determined that the high costs associated with implementing the web-based order tracking system, coupled with the uncertainty of whether customers would readily embrace the new system, indicated either shelving the project or finding another alternative.

WebSmart Weighs In

Danner went back to search the web and software product directories and found another web/wireless development solution called WebSmart from BCD. WebSmart, he found, is a portable PC-based development tool for quickly developing and deploying simple to sophisticated System i Web/Wireless applications. WebSmart automatically produces dynamic HTML and CGI programs written in ILE/RPG. Developers could rapidly produce production ready applications using the 70+ inquiry, maintenance, wireless, reporting, shopping cart, online ordering, and product catalog templates and then customize their programs using ProGen Macro Language (PML), or create their own templates.

Newville and Danner decided to review WebSmart. They downloaded an evaluation copy from BCD's website (www.bcdsoftware.com), along with the user manual in PDF format. He called for a temporary pass code, and they were on their way. "In addition, BCD sent me a hard copy of the user guide as well." Unlike other vendors," states Danner, "BCD let us evaluate the product without first making a financial commitment."

Because of the tutorial, sample applications, templates, and the web knowledgebase, Danner quickly became proficient. He asserts that a big advantage with WebSmart is that it is simple to use. "There is nothing to get in the way of successfully building a site with WebSmart," cites Danner. "The templates were a big help. After you compile your program, you can modify the RPG source it creates with PML. It's all very straightforward," He also noted that although much of his experience with WebSmart exploited skills he already had, there were a couple of stumbling blocks that BCD's technical support team was helpful and responsive in resolving.



BCD

Weigh-Tronix purchased WebSmart, receiving unlimited developer seats and unlimited end-users for \$14,000. The initial development cycle was only two weeks, resulting in a fully functional production application.

A Quantifiable Asset

Now, rather than calling Fairmont Minnesota based Weigh-Tronix to check on the status of an order, customers can sign on with a user I.D. and Password to a secured page that resides at www.weigh-tronix.com. A 30-day order history is initially displayed. When the customer sees the order number he is looking for, he can determine if the correct items have been shipped and check for exceptions. One click on the order brings him to the shipping page and he can see when and how the order was shipped. By clicking on the tracking number, the customer is linked to the shipper's website. Real time order tracking information including estimated time of delivery is displayed through a dynamic link to UPS and Federal Express.

If a customer enters an order at 10:09 AM, he can log in at 10:10 and see that the order is already in process. Weigh-Tronix has eliminated the need for staff to answer the telephone past 5 PM at their Midwestern US facility to handle inquiries from West Coast distributors and customers because the system is available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Jim Rather, Vice President of Marketing for Weigh-Tronix comments, "Weigh-Tronix is the first company in this industry to offer on-line order tracking, our competitors don't have it. Improving communications in any industry is a major benefit to both the company and the people you are selling to."

When asked if he's comfortable with the level of security inherent with BCD's product given the fact that production data and systems are now accessible through the web, Danner responded emphatically, "Yes. The product offers great security. One nice thing about WebSmart is that order numbers and account numbers don't appear in the URL."

Currently, Danner is finishing up another automated order entry application that takes the customer number at login, and displays all outstanding invoices with aging and calculates available credit. "WebSmart is a great tool—we've just scratched the surface with it so far."

At Weigh-Tronix, the heavy weight of full-cycle customer service has been lessened through the implementation of a web-based order entry/order tracking system. Newville says, "With the reasonable acquisition cost of WebSmart it was easily cost justified. Our customers love it and we are very pleased with the end result. It has allowed us to do things that we didn't think we could afford to do."



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